THE WAY WE WERE

Remembering Waldo
Alfred L. Levitt

It was some time in the late forties. I can't place the date any closer than that. Waldo Salt and I were both working at RKO -- on different projects -- and were having lunch in the studio commissary. At that primitive time there was a single phone available to make or to receive calls.

It was located at the cashier's counter and, in addition to her other duties, the cashier would answer the telephone and page the person wanted.

I remember that during this particular lunch Cary Grant was called. He rose from his table, walked to the cashier, and held a conversation with the caller. No one in the commissary paid him much attention. A little later there was a call for Ingrid Bergman, and that talented actress got up from her table, walked to the cashier's counter, and took her call.

They were both very important stars, but I noticed that no one interrupted lunch or conversation to observe these film luminaries.

Later still, the cashier announced a "telephone call for Mr. Leo Durocher." Forks and spoons were halted in mid-air. Every head swiveled to get a look at the well known baseball figure, as he got up and took his call.

That was a sociological phenomenon that intrigued Waldo, and he expounded on it with great insight. His basic point was that someone who is celebrated outside your own field is held in much greater esteem than a person who has stature in your own profession.

The comment was interesting, but it was not an infallible truth -- as Waldo unwittingly proved several years later.

There was a Guild meeting at the Beverly Hilton relating to the 1973 strike. (My collaborator remembers it as the 1981 strike, but we agree on all other details.) Before the floor discussion began the members were instructed that -- when recognized by the chair -- we should first state our name, the field in which we worked, and then speak our piece.

When Waldo's turn came, he said, of course: "Waldo Salt, screen."

That was all he was able to say for several minutes. The membership cheered him loudly and at length. It is a reasonable assumption that the Guild members recognized and applauded his great talent and craftmanship. It is probable, too, that some degree of the intensity of the Guild members' reaction expressed their recognition that his accomplishments were the more remarkable for his having surmounted -- without compromising his principles -- the barrier of having been blacklisted.

When, at last, the noise subsided Waldo spoke quietly and forcefully in behalf of the interests of all Guild members. When he finished and returned to his seat there was more loud, enthusiastic cheering.

Returning closer to the present time...

During the dinner break at a recent Board meeting a videotape about the late Waldo Salt was shown. Only a few of us on the Board knew Waldo personally, but everyone knew <u>of</u> him, and everyone knew and respected his work.

Seeing excerpts from "Midnight Cowboy," "Coming Home," and other films written by Waldo -- and hearing his comments about them, as well as reminiscences about him by those who were closest to him (his two daughters and their mother, in particular) -- was fascinating.

But for most writers, whether or not they knew him personally, listening to Waldo articulate his approach to writing motion pictures was a revelation.

There is no shortage of "experts" who lecture and write books telling you how to write screenplays. However, there is nothing and no one that I know of, in print or elsewhere, that (or who) deals with the art of writing films as cogently and as profoundly as Waldo's explanation of his concerns and beliefs about cinematic story-telling.

###

Almost exactly a year ago Waldo won the Laurel Award for Screenwriting. It is the highest honor the Guild bestows and is given, not for a single screenplay, but for a body of work. It was presented -- appropriately -- by another highly talented writer named John Gay. John had never met Waldo, so he asked me for material he could use in introducing him.

Among other data, I told him of an incident that took place during the spring of 1951, during the first round of Un-American Activity Committee hearings following the 1947 sessions that "created" the Hollywood Ten. Waldo, incidentally, was scheduled to be the eleventh, but the Committee retreated in defeat after the tenth witness, and terminated the hearings.

But not forever.

In the spring of 1951, the committee resumed its witch hunt. I was then working at MGM. The Committee didn't get around to Helen and me until the following September.

A writer named Allen (not Allan Manings) who was also working at Metro had a friend in Washington who would telephone him after each session of the Committee and give him a list of that day's "catch" -- those who were named as subversives or who demonstrated their subversiveness by refusing to cooperate with the Committee.

The hearings ended each day at about one o'clock, Los Angeles time, conveniently allowing Allen to come to the writers table in the MGM Commissary, and read to us that day's haul of "Un-Americans."

Those were, to understate it, very unpleasant lunches; but I felt, somehow, that it would be morally wrong for me to eat lunch elsewhere; it would be a surrender of some sort that I can't explain.

One day Allen read the name Waldo Salt.

A writer named Richard Brooks gasped. "Waldo Salt!" he cried. "But he's such a talented writer!"

That non sequitur is interesting, I think, because it was before the world recognized Waldo's talent. It was before he won Oscars for "Midnight Cowboy" and "Coming Home." Writers knew that his was an extraordinary talent.

"Shopworn Angel," "Rachel And The Stranger," "Mr. Winkle Goes to War," "The Flame and The Arrow" -- His work survived the tampering of directors and producers; try as they might, their sabotage was never able to extinguish the flame that was Waldo's talent. It shone through.

At an early point during World War II Waldo -- then unmarried -- decided to enlist. He sold his car, gave up his apartment, and presented his body to the military -- in that

order. The body was checked and found to be in fine shape -- except for one little thing. There was a tiny tear in his diaphragm. Not enough to cause him any trouble, but enough to disqualify him from military service.

So there he was -- a homeless, car-less civilian.

He went back to MGM for a while, then worked for the OWI (the Office of War Information), writing films for the military. Later, he served as an adviser on a government film about the 1945 San Francisco Conference that established the United Nations.

In the last few days I've learned things about Waldo I never knew. I knew, of course, that he had gone to Stanford, that he had taught at Menlo Junior College, and that he became a junior writer at MGM.

I <u>didn't</u> know that he was born in Chicago, or that he went to a private school in British Columbia. And I never suspected that he went to a military academy.

What handicaps he had to overcome!

In 1981 the Writers Guild was on strike. There was a big meeting at which it became clear that a number of members were nervous, their resolve shaky. There were many who spoke for capitulation.

The procedure for getting the floor was to raise your hand. When recognized you stated your name and status (whether a Current or Associate member). Waldo's raised hand was recognized. He said "Waldo Salt, Current --" and there was an immediate outburst of thunderous applause.

Waldo was visibly stunned -- taken aback by this spontaneous expression of respect by his fellow writers. When it subsided he spoke quietly and not at great length. But he gave strength to those whose resolve was weakening.

In addition to everything else Waldo was, he was a deeply loving father and grandfather. He adored his daughters, Jennifer and Deborah; and his grandson, Jonah. And I have more than a strong suspicion that those feelings were returned. If you respond to talent and beauty and integrity, you would be unable <u>not</u> to love Jenny and Debby and Jonah. And Waldo.

When de Gaulle died there was a headline in a French newspaper that I've never forgotten. It said: De Gaulle Is Dead/France Is A Widow

I understand that better now than I did when it first appeared. Waldo is dead, and we are <u>all</u> widowed. Eve and Mary, Jennifer and Debbie, David and Bob. And Jonah -- the only male to carry Waldo's genes.

And writers and film audiences everywhere -- all are widowed.

In October of 1947 19 writers, directors, and actors were subpoenaed to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in hearings held in Washington, D.C. One hostile witness after another defied the Committee so vigorously that HUAC was forced to retreat, terminating the hearings after only ten witnesses had appeared. The latter were thereafter known as "The Hollywood Ten."

The Committee was routed, the resistance was victorious! Then the behind-the-scenes negotiations began. The film industry, ever paranoid about its perception of the public's "attitude," met with representatives of the Committee at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, and adopted what became known as the "Waldorf Statement."

It expressed the Producers Association opposition to the idea of a blacklist, but also said it would fire (and refuse to hire) the ten who didn't cooperate with the Committee. RKO not only terminated the contracts of its two employees among the Ten, it also fired the writer who would have become the Hollywood Eleventh -- had the hearings continued. RKO was ultimately persuaded that blacklisting No. 11 was premature, so his contract was reinstated and he had a few more years of employability -- until the fifties.

Then his blacklisting became official. He wrote a play and went to New York with it, and New York became his home for many years. During that time he wrote television scripts, re-wrote motion pictures, worked with pseudonyms, behind "fronts" -- and was generally active in the "black market."

In about 1962, as "Walter Davenport," he went to Argentina on location to work on a motion picture that is not his favorite. (Trumbo, during the time that THE BRAVE ONE was nominated for an Oscar and no one could be found who would admit to having written it -- said: "I have made it a policy never to confirm or deny that I had anything to do with the writing of a specific film. That way I hope to have a little credit reflected on me for some of the fine films with which I had absolutely nothing to do -- and to escape identification with some of the stinkers I have really written.")

Around the time our Hollywood 11th was returning from Argentina Otto Preminger had forced UA into being courageous by announcing that Dalton Trumbo had written EXODUS.

Not wanting to seem to be "caught" in this matter, UA tried to "slip" the information that WS had written TARA BULBA into the travel notes of the trade papers. An item was planted saying that WS was returning from Argentina with the TARAS BULBA company. They hoped no one would notice.

Goodbye, Walter Davenport -- Hello, Waldo Salt!

From then on he worked and flourished in the sunlight.

IN MEMORIAM - WALDO SALT
Alfred L. Levitt 3/20/87

Only a few weeks short of one year after he won the Laurel Award for Screenwriting, Waldo Salt died. His loss will be felt not only by his family and friends, but by the entire community of writers. He was a brilliantly talented screenwriter, and a gifted painter as well.

In 1947 Waldo was one of nineteen who were subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The first ten to testify defied their inquisitors so effectively that the hearings were abruptly suspended. They became the Hollywood Ten. Waldo would have been the eleventh.

The "suspension" lasted almost four years. In the spring of 1951 the Committee resumed its witch hunt, and Waldo was again "invited" to appear before it. This time he was called upon, and was a hostile, uncooperative witness. "Hostile" and "uncooperative" in that period and in that circumstance were badges of honor.

During those hearings I was working at MGM. The Committee didn't get around to Helen and me until the following September. (That note of apology flashes back to a time when those who had <u>not</u> received the call from HUAC were said to have exhibited symptoms of "supoenas envy.") A writer at Metro had a friend in Washington who telephoned in each day's "catch" -- those who defied the Committee or were named as

subversives. The time difference between the east and west coasts enabled the Hollywood end of

the Washington connection to come to the writers table in the MGM Commissary, and read to the lunching scripters that day's haul of Un-Americans.

One day the name Waldo Salt was read. Richard Brooks gasped.

"Waldo Salt!" he cried incredulously. "But he's such a talented writer!"

"Sure, he is," said Leonard Spigelgas. "He wrote the Communist Manifesto."

There was <u>almost</u> unanimous laughter.

Well, Waldo didn't write the Communist Manifesto. The credits on that one were Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels. But by 1951 Waldo had credits on "Shopworn Angel," "Rachel And The Stranger," "Mr. Winkle Goes to War," and "The Flame And The Arrow," among others. His work survived the tampering of inept producers, studio executives, etc., whose sabotage never quite extinguished the flame that was Waldo's talent. It shone through and was recognized by his fellow writers before the rest of the world was aware of it; before he won Academy Awards for "Midnight Cowboy" and "Coming Home."

After the 1951 hearings Waldo and his family moved to New York. There -- using fronts and pseudonyms -- he found enough work to keep his wife and young daughters from going hungry. He began to accumulate credits as M.L. Davenport. (His wife's name was Mary Louise Davenport.) It worked quite well until he was hired by a producer who knew him, and was troubled by the problem of what to call him. Waldo suggested

Mel for M.L., but the nervous producer was afraid he'd slip and call him Waldo. The man's jitters were calmed somewhat by Waldo's offer to change his pseudonym to Walter Davenport -- Walter being close enough to Waldo to allow the producer to cover up any slip of the tongue.

At an early point during World War II Waldo, then unmarried, decided to enlist. He sold his car, gave up his apartment, and presented his body to the military -- in that order.

The body was checked and found to be in fine shape; except for one little thing. There was a tiny tear in his diaphragm. Not enough to cause him any trouble, but enough to disqualify him from military service.

So, there he was -- a homeless, car-less civilian.

He went back to MGM for a while, then wrote films for the Office of War Information. He served as an adviser on a government film about the 1945 San Francisco Conference that led to the establishment of the United Nations.

Although it was before I met Waldo, I knew that he had gone to Stanford with the late Bob Presnell. I knew that he had taught at Menlo Junior College, and that he had been a junior writer at MGM. But I never knew that he was born in Chicago, or that he went to a private school in British Columbia. And I never <u>suspected</u> that he went to a military academy.

What handicaps he had to overcome!

Waldo had extraordinary rapport with young people, especially young writers, and was very generous with his time and counsel. He was, in turn, deeply appreciated by young people;

at Sundance, at Mill Valley, at AFI -- everywhere.

In accepting the Laurel Award for Screenwriting last year, Waldo said:

"As true writers, as writers true to ourselves and our function, it will always be hard... and if we're good, we'll always be in trouble. Let's be sure we deserve it."

Waldo always was -- and he did.

#